

VZCZCXRO2350
PP RUEHIK
DE RUEHAA #1643 3560512
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 220512Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3941
INFO RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 6031
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3725
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3584
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 4273
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1338
RHMCSSU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 4212
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

UNCLAS ASHGABAT 001643

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN; EEB;
COMMERCE FOR DSTARKS/EHOUSE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV EIND EMIN BBSR BEXP BTIO TX
SUBJECT: ASHGABAT'S PRICEY WHITE MARBLE DECOR

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) In the mid 1990s, the late Turkmen President Niyazov ordered that each newly-built, multistoried house or office building be decked with white marble siding, in order to beautify Turkmen cities, especially Ashgabat. Although the marble is pleasing to the eye, there has been concern regarding its cost and its radon radiation levels. The Turkmen standardization authority checks marble and granite radon radiation levels on all construction projects. Nevertheless, local residents in Ashgabat have complained of radon-related illness from buildings, especially where marble is used in the interior of the building as well as the exterior. Nevertheless, the white marble requirement remains in force by Niyazov's successor President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, who continues to spend a large share of his nation's hydrocarbon revenues on elaborate construction projects.

¶3. (SBU) Stone mines in northern Kuihop, Vietnam supply the overwhelming majority of white marble for Ashgabat's white city projects. A well known Turkmen entrepreneur and his Indian partner told Embassy reps that they sell marble siding and flooring to foreign construction companies in Turkmenistan. Their company reportedly controls 20 percent of the Turkmen market, which amounts to sales between \$8-12 million a month depending on the type of marble and whether it is purchased during high or low construction seasons. They asserted that the Turkmen construction sector consumes 1 million square meters of marble annually, while estimating that marble siding alone costs the country around \$120 million a year. The price for 1 square meter of Vietnamese marble in Turkmenistan reportedly ranges between \$50 and \$70. So, on average, a standard, twelve-story building, which has an exterior area of about 14,000 square meters, may cost the government between \$700,000 - \$980,000 in marble siding alone. The French construction giant Bouygues also imports expensive Italian marble blocks. This high-cost Italian marble can be found on the most expensive office buildings in the country. Marble traders added that Bouygues saves big on costs by cutting its high-end marble blocks in a factory just outside Ashgabat.

¶4. (SBU) One Turkmen marble dealer stated that marble procurement

for construction in the country has risen significantly during the three years that Berdimuhamedov has been president. The Caspian resort area Avaza and new regional projects all require marble siding, with reportedly no exceptions. At the same time, recent competition for marble among producers has reduced prices somewhat, as construction companies have reportedly turned to cheaper marble products produced in smaller Vietnamese mines. The Turkmen government's recent move to strengthen control over the importation of radioactive materials has further complicated these large stone imports. Moreover, the white marble siding is usually hung on a few steel pegs with each slab weighing 100 lbs on average. During an earthquake, some construction experts fear that the marble could easily dislodge and become flying hazards for those on the ground in the proximity of the large marble structures.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: The white marble buildings which abound in Ashgabat have turned the "city of love" into the "white city." In addition, these white buildings continue to pop up in other Turkmen cities. Although President Berdimuhamedov has divorced himself from some of the practices of his predecessor Niyazov, it looks like white marble is here to stay, despite exuberant costs and subsequent safety issues. END COMMENT.

CURRAN